



Rod Blagojevich is only the eighth US governor to be removed from office



Illinois lawmakers oust corruption-tainted governor

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CHICAGO (AFP) — Illinois lawmakers have ousted the state's corruption-tainted governor, capping a political saga sparked by his arrest on charges of trying to sell President Barack Obama's Senate seat for personal gain.

The state Senate voted 59 to 0 that Democrat Rod Blagojevich abused his power and should be removed from office.

He was banned from holding future political office in Illinois and immediately replaced by Lieutenant Governor Pat Quinn, who declared that "the ordeal is over."

Obama gave his best wishes to Quinn and declared in a statement: "Today ends a painful episode for Illinois. For months, the state had been crippled by a crisis of leadership. Now that cloud has lifted."

The senators found Blagojevich guilty of engaging in a lengthy pattern of pay-to-play politics in which he traded campaign donations for political favors and tried to swap his ability to pick Obama's replacement for a cabinet post, ambassadorship or high-paying job for himself or his wife.

"He has deliberately and pathologically abused his power without regard to the people he was elected to serve," senate president John Cullerton told reporters following the vote.

The bulk of the charges in the articles of impeachment stem from a 76-page FBI affidavit it released in the wake of Blagojevich's December 9 arrest amid what prosecutors called a "political corruption crime spree."

Blagojevich has not yet been indicted on the fraud and extortion charges and his criminal trial is months or possibly years away.

He insisted Thursday that he would be exonerated when the whole story came out in court and said he was "saddened and disappointed but not at all surprised" by the senate vote because "the fix was in from the very beginning."

"They threw me out of office today and didn't prove up one single act of wrongdoing. Now, that is just so fundamentally un-American," Blagojevich told reporters outside his Chicago home.

"I'm going to keep fighting to clear my name," he added. "I guess I will just have to wait until I have my day in court."

But Illinois lawmakers said the evidence against Blagojevich was staggering.

Blagojevich is a "devious cynical, crass and corrupt politician, and someone from whom the people of this state must be protected," Senator Dale Righter said prior to the vote.

Obama, who has not been accused of any wrongdoing, so far has managed to emerge essentially unscathed by the scandal that shone a national spotlight on the culture of corruption in Illinois.

Five of the past nine Illinois governors have been indicted or arrested for fraud or bribery and Blagojevich's predecessor, Republican George Ryan, is currently serving a six-and-a-half year sentence for fraud and racketeering.

Blagojevich, a Democrat, is the first Illinois governor to be impeached and only the eighth US governor to be removed from office.

Obama, who was born in Hawaii and moved to Chicago to work as a lawyer and community organizer, managed to advance in the state without much help from Democratic "machine" politics.

And he has kept distant from Blagojevich, who has been surrounded by allegations of corruption since shortly after his 2002 election.

Legislators put forth a litany of charges in the 13 articles of impeachment, including that Blagojevich refused to free up funds for a children's hospital until he received a 50,000-dollar campaign contribution and tried to get editors critical of his administration fired from the Chicago Tribune.

Blagojevich boycotted the first three days of his impeachment trial and flew to New York for a media blitz where he railed against the senate's "unfair" rules and compared his travails to those of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and Mahatma Gandhi.

Then, in an abrupt about-face, he said he would participate after all and delivered an

impassioned plea to save his job.

But, likely mindful of the impact on his pending criminal trial, Blagojevich refused to answer questions under oath.

House prosecutor David Ellis attacked Blagojevich's plea: "When the camera's on, the governor is for the little guy.

"When the camera's off, what are his priorities?" Ellis asked, gesturing at transcripts of the intercepted phone conversations.

"He reminded us today in real detail that he is an unusually good liar," state Senator Matt Murphy said. "We bent over backwards to make sure that this process was fair."